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FOREWORD 4

ARTICLES

TRADITION: A STRANGER TO THE MODERN
WORLD AND CHURCH 5

Michael R. Weed

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
FOR THE CHURCH 15

J. J. M. Roberts

LORD'S SUPPER AND LOVE FEAST 27

Everett Ferguson

ALL THINGS NEW 39

Allan J. McNicol

A CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION, 2005 57

A CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION, 2005

AN EXCHANGE OF VIEWS 63

Leroy Garrett and Jeffrey Peterson

AN ECCLESIOLOGY FOR THE BELIEVERS' CHURCH:
CAN RESTORATIONISTS CLAIM THE TIME? 79

Allan J. McNicol

OBITER DICTA 87

CONTRIBUTORS 91

An Ecclesiology for the Believers' Church: *Can Restorationists Claim the Time?*

Allan J. McNicol

Miroslav Volf, in his well-received book on ecclesiology, tells an interesting story from his childhood which resonates for many. He talks about growing up in a Pentecostal minister's home in Tito's Yugoslavia.¹ Although at the time he resented it, what happened in that little believers' church community totally consumed the life of this family. Volf states it this way: "It would not be quite accurate to say that my parents worked for the church; they lived for that small community of believers entrusted to their care."²

Many of us can relate to this. I can think of dozens of people that I have come across in my journey, who gave themselves to small Christian communities. I think of my own congregation in Australia; a church of about fifty members. We were without a preacher for a while. A brother in another congregation over a hundred miles away for years drove over to our town for the weekend. There he did pastoral work, preached twice on Sunday, and drove back to his hometown that night. After a couple of hours sleep, he would then start his regular work baking cakes at four A.M. on Monday morning. In this life he will never know it, but his commitment made a deep

*An earlier version of this paper was presented orally at Pepperdine University, May 2005.

¹Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), ix.

²Volf, *After Our Likeness*, ix.

impression upon me. It was a major factor in my decision to choose a Christian vocation.

I recite these stories because I wish to use them to provide the foundation for a theological point about ecclesiology. Historically, many theologians look askance at small churches. They question whether small churches have the right to call themselves a church. Let us return to Volf's world. Anyone who knows about what was once Yugoslavia will recall two religious traditions have been dominant in that part of the world for centuries: Orthodox and Roman Catholic. In fact, the boundaries between the old Eastern and Western Roman Empires pass through the Balkans. The Catholic and Orthodox traditions question the legitimacy of believers' congregations to be authentic representations of the Christian faith.

If one were to go out among the people nourished by the Balkan versions of Orthodoxy and Catholicism, it would not be a pretty sight. The hierarchies of those traditions may have put together elegant doctrines of the church, including appropriate nods to apostolic succession; yet we may ask, "What makes them better?" or to put it theologically, "on what grounds does magisterial ecclesial identity nullify the many congregations outside those traditions?" Believers' churches preserved the faith, often through the crucible of persecution. They continue to produce generations of devout persons who manifest godly virtues.³

Let us come closer to home and say a word about Churches of Christ. We wish to touch on three general areas. First, I wish to comment on Volf's theological case for the nature of the church. In the fast-changing post-

³Curtis Freeman, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church," *PRSt* 31 (2004): 260–261; cf. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 133–134.

denominational religious world in which we live this task is an essential beginning point for a responsible discussion about ecclesiology. Second, we wish to identify an emerging theological challenge that presently threatens our fellowship with the loss of its identity. Finally, we wish to say a word about how scholars and teachers can contribute to this ongoing discussion. My central point will be to affirm that, although our fellowship rests on good theological grounds, it is facing rapid fragmentation. Only a recovery of key confessional commitments can stop the current march toward disintegration.

The Basis for a Legitimate Fellowship

In his book, Volf makes a strong case for celebrating the value of “free church” fellowships. Although he dialogues with Catholic and Orthodox theologians, his proposal is clear. Following Jürgen Moltmann, Volf begins with the Trinity. He envisions a model of the Godhead characterized by mutual giving and receiving. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit not only are independent, but also are intrinsically dependent upon one another.⁴ Volf quotes Moltmann:

By the power of their eternal love, the divine persons exist so intimately-with, for, and in one another that they themselves constitute themselves in their unique, incomparable and complete union.⁵

According to Volf, this relationship within the eternal triune life of God has a direct corollary in his actions in history. The appropriate model, when applied to the life of God’s people, is not that of Catholicism or of Orthodoxy, but the local congregation of a believers’ church. Following 1 Corinthians 12–14, Volf views the mutual interactions and exchanges within the life of the congregation as the appropriate model for any ecclesiology

⁴Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 196.

⁵Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 210, quoting Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 174f.

built on the Trinity. Its culmination is the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1–22:5 which describes God’s people in his new world. Volf states, “The future of the church in God’s new creation is the mutual personal indwelling of the triune God and of his glorified people.”⁶

It is important to note that Volf argues that the network of interconnected relationships includes not only community life (thus undercutting a strong clergy/laity model), but also hearing the word, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. The faith of a community of believers cannot be nourished apart from body life within the church. When we are baptized it is not only the answer of an individual’s good conscience toward God (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism also incorporates us into the web of relationships within the body (Acts 2:47). In Churches of Christ, we understand that at the Lord’s table there are distinctive horizontal as well as vertical dimensions.

I believe Volf has provided a strong theological basis for the legitimacy of a fellowship that finds its ecclesiastical expression primarily in the life of the local congregation. On the grounds of this proposal, we can rest assured that we in Churches of Christ need not hang our heads in any ecumenical conversation on ecclesiology.

Indeed, when we consult the New Testament such a proposal is compatible with its vision of the church as the end-time community of the people of God. Spread across the Roman Empire, these small, struggling communities had fragile connections. They were bound together, not by a top-down structure, but the confession that “Jesus is Lord.”⁷ Ephesians 4:1–16 sets forth the ideal image for the body of Christ; but 1 Corinthians 12–14 reminds us that this rhetoric is useless unless it is instantiated in the local

⁶Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 128.

⁷See Oscar Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (2nd ed., J. K. S. Reid, trans.; London: Lutterworth, 1949).

congregation.

Nevertheless, there exists one major hole in Volf's proposal, as some have noticed.⁸ In many congregations we find a common pattern reflecting the dominance of the model of personal autonomy of American culture. Here spirituality is conceived in strictly individualistic terms: a personal relationship with Jesus, direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, and an understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper as meeting private needs. In this context, the local church appears to be merely another voluntary association, rather than a covenant community. Often, the church functions as no more than a filling station designed to provide resources for individuals to cope with the world.

Volf has a wonderful description of the local church as a legitimate fellowship of the people of God. But how do we get it down on the ground?

Theological Challenge to Churches of Christ

This observation is especially germane to Churches of Christ. Several years ago, writing about the increasing difficulties many have with the Restoration heritage, Richard Hughes gave us this insightful word:

To many participants and observers, there seem to be only two places where restorationists might migrate should they drift from their own roots: mainline Protestantism or evangelicalism. For most primitivists the mainline is not a serious option. Thus the tendency has been for [the] restoration churches to act as perpetual feeders of the evangelical establishment as they lose touch with their originating visions.⁹

This observation is incontestable. In urban areas stretching from Atlanta to Los Angeles, large numbers of our people have moved into Bible Churches or nondenominational fellowships. We need to understand this journey into evangelicalism will not be the end—especially for those seeking

⁸Freeman, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered," 267.

⁹Richard T. Hughes, "Restorationists, Churches of Christ, and the Evangelical Mold," *Reforming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 207.

a substantive theological tradition. At the other end of the spectrum, evangelicals regularly lament the loss of many of their most thoughtful people to liturgical traditions. Graduates of Wheaton, Calvin, and Fuller have worn a well-beaten path to Canterbury, Rome, or to points further East. What is the problem? Is it not that a growing number of thoughtful people find evangelical theology a mile wide and an inch deep?¹⁰ Mark Noll, evangelical historian, pointed this out ten years ago in his *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.¹¹ Recently, a review of Noll's book, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, made the observation that, after a study of evangelicalism's heyday, Noll could not find one theological mind (with the possible exception of Lincoln—no evangelical) worthy of emulation. This leads to the plaintive comment:

The unspoken conclusion—not only of this book but also of Noll's oeuvre generally—seems to be that, for thinking people Evangelicalism is a lost cause. The Exodus of Evangelical graduate students from Bible churches to Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism suggests that others have come to a similar conclusion.¹²

This is not because evangelicals lack intellectual resources. Among evangelicals these exist in abundance. Analysis suggests the problem lies with evangelical ecclesiology. When the high points of spiritual life are viewed in terms of a closer walk with Jesus and a more intense prayer life,

¹⁰ For additional points, see my two review essays, "Churches of Christ Meet the Evangelicals," *Christian Studies* 19 (2003): 71–78; and "A Confessional Community: The Seedbed of Spiritual Formation," *Christian Studies* 20 (2004): 66–71; see also the many works of David F. Wells on this issue, including his recent *Above all Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹¹ Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

¹² Preston Jones, "Whence the Evangelical Mind?" *Touchstone* 16 (May, 2003): 46.

personal freedom wins over life in community. In my judgment it is not so much that thoughtful evangelicals gravitate to liturgical communities for “the smells and bells.” Rather it is that they long to anchor their lives in a covenant community that takes seriously maintaining connections with Christ through the disciplines of word, liturgy, and sacrament. If I am anywhere near correct with this conclusion, this gives us in Churches of Christ an opening to go back and dust off the resources of our own tradition, which are considerable in this area. We are in an excellent position to offer a way out of the evangelical dead end into which so many gravitate.

Christian Scholars and the Current Ferment in Ecclesiology

Recently at a meeting of the evangelical faculty at the University of Texas, I sat through a talk by a nationally known scholar starting his journey from evangelicalism to Catholicism. During the presentation this scholar talked about his persistent search for a covenantal community that believed the historical doctrines of the faith and sought to practice them seriously. He listed a number of area churches that he visited before settling upon Catholicism. I almost raised my hand to ask, “Have you tried Churches of Christ?” Aside from issues of propriety, I also had a mental reservation. If he went to a Church of Christ, what would he find?

I have suggested that our current fascination with evangelicalism is spiritually and theologically a dead end. The desire of many ministers to embrace the practices of evangelicalism, and increasingly its theology, is producing confusion and fragmentation among our people. I believe our teachers may play a constructive role in several ways.

First, I would suggest that we can work in our local communities to build at least one congregation where church is not done in the default setting. In studying the New Testament, we realize that congregations were not perfect in the first century. Nor should we expect perfection today. But if our

Restoration vision is to maintain plausibility within our constituency it must operate with integrity somewhere. Consequently, we must work to build congregations that live by this vision. This should be our starting point.

Second, wherever there is opportunity, we ought to direct our teaching and research into areas that are valuable for the church. Administrators in Christian colleges and seminaries can help by encouraging church-related scholarship. Also, It would be of considerable value to the church if one or several of our colleges engaged in a vigorous conversation with ecumenical Christianity from the perspective of the Restoration Movement.

Third, let me urge that we think about how we may engage anti-intellectualism in society and churches today. Note how many have accepted the *The Da Vinci Code* as historically accurate! Teachers and scholars are needed to provide resources for recovering and maintaining our identity.

Summary

By example and argument, Miroslav Volf has shown that the vision of a believers' church is biblically and theologically compatible with traditional Restoration emphases. Unfortunately, in recent years these perspectives have suffered under the cultural influences of autonomy and individualism. Now that others are re-discovering these truths, it would be tragic if we ourselves let them slip. Above all, teachers and scholars have resources to remind our churches of the value of our Restoration heritage and theology. We also have obligations to our churches. The hour is late.

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